

NANOCRYSTAL-CONTAINING FILTRATION MEDIA

This application is a continuation-in-part of U.S. Serial No. 09/805,758, filed March 13, 2001, a continuation-in-part of U.S. Serial No. 09/772,542, filed January 30, 2001, and a continuation-in-part of U.S. Serial No. 09/560,824, filed April 28, 2000, which is a continuation-in-part of U.S. Serial No. 08/819,999, the entire contents of each of which are hereby incorporated by reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The invention relates to a filtration media containing nanocrystals made of metal oxide dispersed in a binder matrix for the removal of microorganisms and other contaminants from water.

2. Description of Related Art

Drinking water, in some locations world-wide, contains bacteria and viruses that are harmful to humans, in many cases, rendering the water unfit for consumption. There are a variety of different techniques and equipment that can reduce bacteria and viruses to certain acceptable performance levels, such as ceramic filters, sub-micron filters, ion exchange resins, ultra-violet lights, ozonators, distillation equipment, and other apparatus. Microfiltration generally presents significant drawbacks because of the large pressure drops involved and because of the limited capacity of the microfilters. With bacteria having sizes of around 0.1 micron, such as B. Diminuta,

the performance of microfilters is generally very poor, and clogging takes place in a short time. Consumers who use these filters to reduce bacteria generally must rely on increased pressure drop as the only indication that it is time to replace the microfilter. There is no reliable method to determine whether the filter will last 10, 50, 100 or 1000 gallons, or what the remaining capacity of a filter in use might be. Turbidity and the presence of other contaminants than microorganisms can affect the surface of the microfilter, which creates some limitations on the use of the filter. Ultra-violet lights are affected by scale buildup on the lamp sites and frequency changes that may effect their performance in bacteria reduction, and UV wavelength sensors are very expensive.

Filtration media are often assigned a "rating" based upon the size of particulates that can be removed from water using these filters. Typical testing to establish these ratings include NSF Class 1 Particulate and NSF 53 AC Dust testing. Reducing the ratings (desirable, because it indicates that smaller particles can be produced) generally requires the use of specialized particles having very small pore sizes. These particles become difficult and expensive to produce, so that decreasing the nominal rating of the filtration media is limited by the expense of the particles necessary to include in the media. In addition, filters that have submicron ratings, and which function by occlusion, have very short lifetimes. For example, a 0.2 micron rated filter of approximately 3 in. diameter and 10 in. length filtering New York City water at 1 gpm will suffer reduced capacity and significantly increased pressure drop after filtering only 100 gallons of water.

Recent advances in "hybrid" materials, i.e., nanostructured materials that contain both organic and inorganic components or moieties, has led to the development of filtration materials capable of achieving submicron level removal of particulates as well as removal of microorganisms, but that are capable of operating at high flow rates and for extended periods of time without substantial degradation of performance. The invention described herein is one such material.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

It has been found that combining nanocrystals of metal oxides, such as zinc oxide or titanium oxide or mixtures thereof, encapsulated in or impregnated into a binder matrix. The binder matrix may be a polymeric material, and the metal oxide nanocrystals may be optionally mixed with carbon and/or other organic particulates. The inclusion of the metal oxide nanoparticles significantly decreased the micron rating of the filtration material as compared to the same material without the nanoparticles, and provided a material that is capable of reducing levels of microorganisms, such as bacteria, including those having an average particle size ranging from about 0.1 to about 1 micron, at an efficiency of 99.999%.

Without wishing to be bound by any theory, it is believed that the filtration media functions to remove microorganisms without significant size exclusion of the microorganisms. Regardless of the exact mechanism by which the material functions, it allows the preparation of a filtration media that is capable of removing submicron contaminants at extremely high efficiency. The inclusion of metal oxide nanoparticles in the filtration media allows the use of binder and, e.g., carbon

particulates suitable for achieving a micron or larger nominal rating, but in fact achieving submicron performance without diminished lifetime. By contrast with the 0.2 micron filter described above, a similar filter including metal oxide nanoparticles can process over 1000 gallons of the same water at the same flow rate with less than a 30% pressure drop at the end of processing.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF SPECIFIC EMBODIMENTS

According to the invention, nanocrystals of metal oxides having particles sizes ranging from approximately 20 nm to 400 nm are incorporated into a filtration media containing a binder matrix. Desirably, this filtration media also contains some form of additional particulate, such as activated carbon, and the binder is desirably a polymeric material. The resulting filtration media is capable of destroying bacteria and other organisms having sizes below 1 micron.

The filtration media of the invention can be viewed as a microcoating of metal oxide nanocrystals on the surface of a polymeric binder (including internal surfaces, such as those provided by pores within the binder matrix). The metal oxide nanocrystals are included in amounts ranging from approximately 0.1% up to about 10% by weight, based upon the weight of the entire filtration media. Suitable metal oxides include, but are not limited to, zinc oxide, copper oxide, and titanium dioxide. Other metal oxide nanocrystals may also be suitable, and this can be determined by preparing suitable filter blocks containing these metal oxide nanocrystals, as

described herein, and testing the blocks against submicron particles and against microorganisms, as described herein, to determine their suitability.

The nanocrystals are believed to interact with the binder, which is typically a polymeric binder, such as high density polyethylene or low density polyethylene or a mixture thereof. The nanocrystals are typically combined with the polymer and, before or after the addition of other optional components such as activated carbon, heated to a temperature ranging from about 150°C to about 250°C. The nanocrystals can be incorporated into the polymer by, e.g., high-speed shear mixing for approximately 10-30 minutes in the mixer. The nanocrystals and the polymeric binder in particulate form are simply added to the mixer in the requisite quantities, and mixed. Activated carbon and optionally zirconia can then be added. The order of addition is not critical, however it is generally desirable to add the nanocrystals to the binder prior to adding other components and prior to heating, in order to assure complete mixing. The resulting mixture is then heated to raise the temperature of the polymeric binder. In general, the polymeric binder material containing the metal oxide nanocrystals is heated slowly to form the filtration media. Polymeric binders containing the metal oxide nanocrystals are then heated from about 30 minutes to about 6 hours at an approximate temperature of 550°F in order to form a block of filtration media.

PREPARATION EXAMPLE

High-density polyethylene particles (20 wt%, based on the total mixture) are combined with 2 wt% ZnO nanocrystals having particle sizes in the range of about 20 nm to about 100 nm, and prepared by plasma vaporization, quenching, and cooling (i.e., by a "fuming" process), with 7 wt% particulate zirconia, and the balance particulate active carbon. The mixture is filled into a round cylindrical metal alloy mold designed to evenly distribute heat across its surface. The material is then compressed 100 psi under heating at a temperature of 500° F for at least about 1 hour, up to a maximum of about 6 hours, and then cooled to ambient temperature. The resulting block of material can then be used as a filtration media that will reduce the level of microorganisms in a fluid.

It has been found that quantities of titanium dioxide nanocrystals as low as 7.5 micrograms demonstrated the capacity to repeatedly (over 56 times) destroy E-coli colonies in water (30,000 counts in 1000 cc of water). An average sized filter prepared from the filtration media of the invention contains around 0.5% by weight, based on the total weight of the filtration media, of nanocrystals of zirconia or titania or both, and is capable of destroying tens of billions of bacteria. The percentage of metal oxide nanocrystals impregnated into the polymer can determine the capacity of the filter for the reduction of bacteria and other microorganisms. For instance, passing approximately 400 gallons of water containing *B. Diminuta* at a concentration of 10,000 ct/cc at a flow rate of 0.5 to 1 gpm through a 2.5 in. diameter x 10 in. cylindrical filter with a nominal micron rating of approximately 1-5 micron and having around 0.5 wt% nanocrystals of titania or zinc oxide or mixtures thereof

(based on the total weight of the filtration media) can reduce the bacteria count by 99.999%. This same filter can achieve the same efficiency with water containing 1,000 ct/cc over the course of treating approximately 1,500 gallons of water at similar flow rates. Since the average toxic bacteria count in water under the worst expected conditions would typically not exceed 1,000-3,000 ct/cc in drinking water (which is considered unacceptable for human consumption), the nanocrystals combined with zirconia can be calculated accurately for the capacity of the filter of a given size with a given flow rate.

In addition, it has been found that incorporation of the nanocrystals improves the performance of the polymer-carbon filtration media tremendously, possibly by controlling the complexing of the binder, and/or improving the surface structure of the carbon, polymeric binder, and metal oxide combination. Testing was conducted using a filtration media produced by compressing coarse carbon having an average particle size of approximately 50-100 microns, polymer binder particles having an average particle size of approximately 30 microns, with and without 0.2% of nanocrystalline titanium oxide. When the nanocrystalline titanium oxide was included, a 99.999% efficiency one micron filter was obtained. Without the nanocrystalline titanium oxide, the rating of the filter was approximately 5-20 microns, more particularly 10 micron. The inclusion of 0.5% of nanocrystalline titanium oxide results in the ability to form a one-micron filter (i.e., a filter capable of removing 1 micron particle dust in test water at a level of 50,000 ct/cc with an efficiency of 99.99%).

The 0.1 wt% nanocrystalline titanium oxide filter described above was tested by NSF for bacteria reduction.

EXAMPLE 1

5000 gallons of water seeded with 30,000 ct/cc E. Coli were passed through a 169 cu. in. filter having a micron rating of 2, at 3gpm, with an inlet pressure of 60 psi and an outlet pressure of 52 psi. The filter compositions were 0.5% nanocrystalline titanium oxide, 6% zirconia crystals, 20% high density HDPE and the balance activated carbon. The filtration media resulted in a bacterial reduction efficiency of 99.9999%.

EXAMPLE 2

The test described above in Example 1 was also conducted by seeding the water with 0.1 micron bacteria (B. diminuta) at a concentration of approximately 70,000 ct/cc, and using 4,000 gallons of water. The filtration media demonstrated a bacterial reduction efficiency of 99.9999%.

The filtration media used in the above examples can theoretically purify 30,000 gallons or more of water if the incoming count of bacteria does not exceed about 2,000 ct/cc.

COMPARATIVE EXAMPLE 1

A ceramic filter block having a 0.2 micron rating, in the form of a cylindrical block of diameter 2 1/2 inches and a length of 20 inches was tested for reduction of E.

coli and B. Diminuta by passing water through the filtration block at a variable flow rate as indicated below.

Flow at:	15 min.	1.3 gpm
	60 min.	0.2 gpm
	90 min.	0.1 gpm
	Total flow	102 gallons

The level of E. coli bacteria in the test water was 70000 ct/cc; the total dissolved solids of the water was 300 ppm and the hardness of the water was 200 ppm. The ceramic filter reduced E. coli at an efficiency of 99.9% at the beginning of the experiment, and at an efficiency of 99.99% at the end of the experiment.

The level of B. diminuta in the test water was 60,000 ct/cc, and the flow rate was varied as indicated below:

Flow at:	1 min.	1.6 gpm
	2 min.	0.4 gpm

The total dissolved solids content and hardness of the water are as indicated above with respect to testing for E. coli.

The reduction after 90 min. was 92%.

EXAMPLE 3

A cylindrical block filtration media was prepared by mixing 2 wt% ZnO nanocrystals with 20 wt% high-density polyethylene binder, 7 wt% zirconia and 71

wt% activated carbon, and heating this mixture under pressure to form a block having a diameter of 3 1/2 inches and a length of 20 inches. The filter was tested for E. coli and B. diminuta removal efficiency as indicated below:

E. coli bacteria reduction: 70,000 ct/cc

Flow at: 1 min. 3 gpm

5000 gallons: 3 gpm

Reduction: 99.999%

B. diminuta bacteria reduction: 70,000 ct/cc

Flow at: 1 min. 3 gpm

3,000 gallons: 3 gpm

Reduction at 3,000 gallons: 99.999%

These examples demonstrate that the use of nanocrystalline titanium oxide allows the preparation of a polymeric binder-based filtration media having an exact micron rating filter with 99.99% accuracy, and much lower than is possible using the polymeric binder without the nanocrystalline particles. Most manufacturers of carbon block filters add approximately 5% carbon dust of about 32 microns to improve the filtration capabilities to obtain a 1 micron rating (i.e., an efficiency at removing 1 micron particles of 99.99%). In most cases, 5% carbon dust is very difficult to control on the surface of the binder, and substantial added amounts of pressure are required to get a uniform product. The filter block containing nanocrystals has been found to work well under compression, from as low as 30 psi to as high as 500 psi.

The performance of the surface of the nanocrystals is not affected by the pressure, nor by the heat.

For more information